

What Is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a type of psychological treatment that helps people learn how to identify, challenge, and change negative thought patterns that influence their feelings and behaviors. Originally used in the treatment of depression, CBT has been proven effective for a wide range of issues including anxiety, PTSD, insomnia, eating disorders, addiction, and more. Keep reading for a deeper look into cognitive behavioral therapy including its origin, benefits, and key techniques plus how to get the best results.



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Origins of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

CBT was created in the 1960s by Aaron Beck, an American psychologist. He pioneered the approach after noticing that many of his depressed patients had pervasive negative self-talk that often impacted their feelings and behavior. These pessimistic thought patterns seemed to occur spontaneously, leading Beck to term them “automatic thoughts.”

Most people have heard automatic thoughts throughout their lifetime, so they generally accept that these thoughts are true. Beck’s purpose in creating CBT was to reveal their inaccuracy; he taught people how to monitor their thought processes, challenge the veracity of these automatic thoughts, and change them to reflect reality. Using CBT, patients discover that negative self-talk doesn’t reflect the truth. They’re then able to change their feelings and behavior by correcting their automatic thoughts.

Types of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

There are various types of cognitive behavioral therapy, most of which developed as offshoots of the original approach after its creation. Some of the most common types of CBT you may encounter are:

Cognitive Therapy (CT): Cognitive therapy focuses primarily on thought patterns, teaching patients how to test and change their disordered thinking.

Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT): Primarily used to treat posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), this therapeutic approach helps patients understand then alter the effects of past trauma.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT): Often used to treat borderline personality disorder, this approach teaches patients how to live in the present moment, cope with stress, regulate their emotions, and effectively communicate with others.

Multimodal Therapy (MMT): Multimodal therapy is based on the belief that as complex creatures, humans can't be treated through a single therapeutic approach; in addition to thoughts, feelings, and behavior, patients must also be evaluated and treated based on their interpersonal relationships, mental imagery, physical feelings, drug use, and other biological influences.

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT): Rational emotive behavior therapy predates CBT and served as a major influence in its development. This approach helps patients focus on the present, identify negative thoughts, challenge their rationality, and replace them with more productive thoughts.

Self-Instructional Training: In this type of CBT, a therapist identifies the patient's dysfunctional thought patterns then provides a positive behavioral model and self-instructions for them to emulate.

Stress Inoculation Training: The goal of stress inoculation training is to help patients better cope with stressful events by teaching them how to manage their reactions in advance.

Who Needs Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?

CBT is often used to treat people suffering from:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- PTSD
- Addiction
- Eating disorders
- Insomnia

- Phobias
- Low self-esteem
- Grief
- Stress
- Anger issues
- Panic attacks
- Chronic pain
- Personality disorders

However, you don't have to be suffering from a specific ailment in order to benefit from CBT; it can help anyone with a desire to improve their self-talk, become happier, and overcome self-defeating behaviors.

Benefits of CBT

The primary benefit to engaging in cognitive behavioral therapy is developing healthier patterns of thinking. By learning to monitor and challenge their negative self-talk, patients can eliminate maladaptive thinking and replace it with more rational thought patterns.

CBT also has a significant effect on the regulation of emotions. The way a person thinks often influences their emotional state. Once patients have developed the ability to observe, question, and replace negative thoughts, they're better able to manage their emotions. This is especially helpful for those who have struggled with controlling anger or stress.

After patients have learned how to correct irrational thinking and manage their emotions, they experience a whole host of additional benefits including improved self-esteem, communication skills, and ability to cope with the everyday stressors of life. Patients are also able to:

- Clearly identify problems
- Understand how past experiences affect current beliefs
- Set attainable goals
- Become aware of automatic thoughts
- Differentiate between rational and irrational thoughts
- Challenge faulty assumptions
- Learn to gauge their mood
- View situations from various perspectives
- Stop anticipating the worst-case scenario

- Focus on reality instead of expectations
- Understand what motivates other people's behavior
- Develop a more positive outlook
- Stop avoiding fears and face them instead
- ...and more

The best news of all is that none of these benefits expire; since CBT can be applied in a wide variety of contexts, patients can use the strategies learned during therapy sessions for many years to come.

What Does a Cognitive Behavioral Therapist Do?

The role of the cognitive behavioral therapist is to elicit information about what you're struggling with, identify maladaptive thought patterns, help you understand how these thought patterns have negatively affected your life, and teach you how to reorder your thinking. There are multiple techniques and activities a cognitive behavioral therapist could use in your treatment. A few of the most commonly used approaches are:

Goal Setting: A cognitive behavioral therapist will teach their clients how to set goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-based (SMART goals). Having goals to work toward provides patients with a clear focus and gives them hope that change is possible.

Self-Monitoring: The ability to self-monitor is essential in CBT. Patients must learn how to pay attention to and accurately assess their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in order to produce change. For example, if a patient is overweight because they're an emotional eater, they'll benefit from monitoring what thoughts or situations trigger overeating plus how they feel before and after they eat.

Identifying Negative Thoughts: Another essential skill for CBT patients to learn is how to identify negative thoughts. Often the same soundtrack has been running through a patient's head for years without being noticed. Being able to observe and identify negative thoughts shines a light on them, bringing them out into the open where the patient and therapist can evaluate their accuracy.

Reframing: The purpose of this technique is to provide patients with an alternate way of looking at a specific thought or situation. Let's say, for example, that a patient is upset because their friend hasn't texted them back. The patient thinks "My friend is deliberately ignoring me." By reframing the situation, the patient could look at other possibilities, like the friend is busy working or they didn't see the text notification.

Journaling: The practice of journaling provides patients with an outlet for their thoughts, allowing them to process what they're experiencing more fully. Journaling

often provides patients with deeper insights into what ultimately triggers their negative thoughts, moods, and behavior.

Role Play: Role playing is a valuable tool that allows patients to restructure their thoughts and practice new behavior with their therapist before implementing it in the real world. For example, the patient wants to visit a sick parent in another state, but they don't ask for time off because they fear "My co-workers will hate me for taking time off" or "My boss will learn things run more smoothly when I'm not around." The therapist and patient could role play to identify and change these maladaptive thoughts and rehearse requesting time off without those mental barriers in place.

These are just a few of the many techniques that cognitive behavioral therapists use to help their clients. Each case is different, however; your therapist will thoroughly evaluate your unique set of needs before determining the best course of treatment.

How to Get the Best Results from CBT

In order to get the best possible results from cognitive behavioral therapy, there are five key requirements:

1. Be Willing to Change

Your life won't improve just by showing up to the therapist's office; you need to have the right mindset and be willing to make adjustments in your life to see lasting, positive change.

2. Commit to the Process

For CBT to be effective, you must meet with your therapist for 30-60 minutes every week for 5 to 20 weeks. (The therapy schedule will be determined by your practitioner based on your treatment needs.) You should be aware of this commitment in advance and commit to following the process through to the end to get the best results.

3. Trust Your Therapist

Therapy is a collaborative process between you and your therapist, which requires mutual trust. Though the process may be uncomfortable at times since you're uncovering deep-seated thought patterns, you need to trust that your therapist has the qualifications and experience to guide you through the process and help you improve.

4. Do All the Exercises

CBT often involves homework because the techniques you learn are less likely to stick if you only use them during therapy sessions. Don't just show up for sessions then walk away; be fully committed to completing every exercise, even if you don't see its merit. If

you want a better understanding of the purpose of each exercise, simply ask your therapist – they'll be happy to explain how it's meant to help.

5. Have Realistic Expectations

While CBT can certainly bring about positive changes in your life, it's important to have realistic expectations of the likely outcomes. For example, CBT can help you correct negative thought patterns about a failed marriage, but that doesn't mean you and your spouse will reconcile. Set realistic goals for treatment with the help of your therapist to manage expectations.

How to Get Started with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

If you're ready to get started with CBT, the first step is to find a licensed therapist in your area. There are several ways to approach this. For example, you could locate a therapist by getting a referral from your physician or asking friends for recommendations. Another avenue would be to contact your health insurance provider to see if they have a list of approved practitioners in your area. A few other suggestions for getting started include:

Online Directories and Professional Organizations: You can look through online directories of mental health professionals, such as Psychology Today's therapist finder. Professional organizations, like the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) or the American Psychological Association (APA), also maintain directories of practicing clinicians who specialize in CBT.

Online Therapy Platforms: Online therapy has gained popularity, especially given the increased need for remote services during the pandemic. Platforms like BetterHelp, Talkspace, or Doctor on Demand connect users with licensed therapists who specialize in CBT and other types of therapy.

Telehealth Services: Some traditional healthcare providers or insurance companies offer telehealth services, which can include access to CBT therapists. This option combines the convenience of online therapy with the potential benefit of being covered under your existing health insurance plan.

Local Mental Health Clinics and Universities: Local mental health clinics often provide CBT among their services. In addition, universities with psychology graduate programs often have training clinics that offer therapy to community members, including CBT, typically at a lower cost than private practice therapy.

Always remember that although starting therapy can feel daunting, it's a significant step towards better mental health. Each of these avenues can be a stepping stone to find the help you need, leading you towards a more empowered, resilient self.

Embracing the CBT Journey

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is a journey of self-discovery and growth. It equips you with the ability to challenge unhelpful thoughts, leading to better emotional management and overall well-being. Although the journey may seem daunting, remember that each step, no matter how small, is progress. CBT empowers you with the tools to understand and change the thought processes that shape your life. Embrace this journey towards a healthier, happier you. You're stronger than you think, and with CBT, you can unlock that strength.